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ABSTRACT

This guide is designed to help parents determine what is being taught to their children about sex education in school, offering tips on how to talk to children about these issues. The first section presents pointers from the "Talking with Kids" campaign: start early; initiate conversations; talk about sex and relationships; create an open environment; communicate one's values; listen to one's child; try to be honest; be patient; use everyday opportunities to talk; and talk about it repeatedly. The next section discusses how to get the conversation going, offering such possible conversation starters as "Have you noticed any changes in your body?" and "Do your friends ever talk about kissing or about their boyfriends and girlfriends?" The third section discusses sex education and age-appropriate topics, presenting pointers from child development experts on talking with children about sex at the right time in their lives. The fourth section explains how to find out about school sex education classes (e.g., call or visit the school, examine the child's health class textbook, and use the local and national PTA as a resource). A list of resources includes resources for parents and youth, resources on specific topics, and books. (SM)

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Talking With Kids:
A Parent's Guide to Sex Education

National PTA

2002

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TALKING WITH KIDS

A Parent's Guide to Sex Education

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National PTA

*every*child. *one* voice.

National PTA is the largest volunteer child advocacy organization in the United States. A not-for-profit association of parents, educators, students, and other citizens active in their schools and communities, PTA is a leader in reminding our nation of its obligations to children.

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Introduction

Dear Parent:

Talking with your children about sex is something that many parents put off until the "right moment," which may or may not ever happen. Some parents simply are not comfortable with the topic themselves, while others worry that they may not be able to answer embarrassing or awkward questions about sex. If you are one of these parents, you're not alone.

While talking with your children about sex may be hard, it's important to their health and future well-being. Research shows that what children don't know about sex can hurt them. In an age when half of all 9-12 grade students have had sexual intercourse, our sons and daughters need to learn how to make responsible choices and to protect themselves.

In a recent survey about sex education conducted by the Kaiser Family Foundation, young people said they need more information about sexual health issues than they are currently receiving in school. This guide is intended to help you open up the channels of communication with your children, particularly about tough issues like sex. Included are tips that can help guide you on what to say and when to talk with your children, how to respond to questions about sex, and how to become more informed and involved in sex education at your children's school. In addition, we have provided a list of resources you can turn to for answers when you need them.

I hope this guide will serve as a valuable information tool as you make decisions about how to best safeguard your children's health and well-being.

Sincerely,

Shirley Igo

National PTA

NUMBERS YOU SHOULD KNOW

- Nearly two-thirds of parents of 8- to 11-year-olds (61 percent) report that their children initiated the first conversations about the basics of reproduction, according to a Kaiser Family Foundation/Children Now/Nickelodeon survey.

- In the same survey, two of five families' discussions about puberty (40 percent) and HIV/AIDS (38 percent) also were initiated by the child.

- One-third of 10- and 11-year-olds (33 percent) say that pressure to have sex is a "big problem" for kids their age.

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CONSIDER THESE FACTS:

- Despite the decrease in teen pregnancy rates over the last decade, 863,700 teen girls became pregnant in the U.S. in 1997, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).
- Approximately 4 million teens will contract a sexually transmitted disease (STD) each year, according to the CDC.
- Half of 12- to 17-year-olds (48 percent) say teens today face "a lot" of pressure when it comes to sex and relationships, according to the Kaiser Family Foundation.

How to Use This Guide

Today's complex world makes parenting one of the most difficult jobs around. At a time when about half of all teenagers have sex, and the dangers of sexually transmitted diseases and pregnancy pose a health threat to our young people, parents increasingly recognize the importance of talking with their children about sex.

Research shows that young people most often look to their parents for information and advice. According to the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy's survey *With One Voice: America's Adults and Teens Sound Off About Teen Pregnancy*, nearly 34 percent of the teens surveyed say they have learned the most about preventing pregnancy from their parents. Only 6 percent of the teens surveyed say they learned about pregnancy prevention from the media.

Research shows that young people most often look to their parents for information and advice.

However, many parents feel awkward and uncomfortable about how and when to talk with their children about sex, and many don't know where they can turn for guidance. If you're one of these parents, this guide was written with you in mind and can help you find out more about what is being taught in school to your children about sex education. This guide includes tips on how to talk with your children about these issues early and often as your children grow and how to answer questions your children might have. We also have included a resource list to help you find more information on specific issues you may want to know more about.

POINTERS FROM THE "TALKING WITH KIDS" CAMPAIGN

Children are naturally curious and ask many questions about sex. A national survey conducted by the Kaiser Family Foundation, Children Now, and Nickelodeon shows that nearly two-thirds of parents of 8- to 11- year-olds (61 percent) report that their child initiated the first conversation about the basics of reproduction. In two out of five families, discussions about puberty (40 percent) and HIV/AIDS (38 percent) also were initiated by the child.

When those questions come up in your home, you should be honest and straightforward in your answers. You may want to start by asking your children what they already know. This gives you the opportunity to correct any misinformation your child might have and provides a point of reference from which to introduce new facts. Here are some pointers developed by the *Talking With Kids About Tough Issues* campaign that can help you start talking together.

*(*Talking With Kids About Tough Issues *is an ongoing campaign of the Kaiser Family Foundation and Children Now. Through a companion partnership with Nickelodeon,* Talking With Kids *also reaches out to children through public service announcements and free resources. The following excerpt, used with permission, comes from a free* Talking With Kids *print guide that is available for parents in English and Spanish.)*

1. **Start Early.** Children are hearing about and forced to cope with tough issues at increasingly early ages, often before they are ready to understand all aspects of these complicated ideas. Additionally, medical research and public health data tell us that when young children want information, advice, and guidance, they turn to their parents first. As a parent, you have a wonderful opportunity to talk with your child about these issues first, before anyone else can confuse your child with incorrect information or explanations that lack the sense of values you want to instill.

2. **Initiate Conversations with Your Children...**

While you may want your children to feel comfortable enough to come to you with any questions and concerns — and thus give you the opportunity to begin conversations — this doesn't always occur. That's why it's perfectly okay — at times even necessary to begin the discussions yourself. TV and other media are great tools for this. Say, for example, that you and your 12-year-old are watching TV together and the program's plot includes a teenage pregnancy. After the show is over, ask your child what he or she thought of the program. Did he or she agree with how the teenagers behaved? Just one or two questions could help start a valuable discussion that comes from everyday circumstances and events. The best technique: Use simple, short words and straightforward explanations.

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3. ...Even About Sex and Relationships.

If you are uncomfortable talking about such sensitive subjects — particularly sex and relationships — with your young child, you're not alone. Many parents feel awkward and uneasy, especially if they are anxious about the subject. For your children's sake, try to overcome your nervousness and bring up the issue with your child. After all, your children are hearing about it both through the media and on the playground, and that information may not include the values that you want your children to have.

4. Create an Open Environment.

Young children want their parents to discuss difficult subjects with them. However, your children will look to you for answers only if they feel you will be open to their questions. How do you create an open atmosphere? By being encouraging, supportive, and positive. For example, if your child asks, "How many people have AIDS?" try not to answer with, "I don't know. Please just finish your lunch." No matter how busy you are, respond with something like, "That's an interesting question, but I'm not sure. Let's go look it up." You don't need to answer all of your children's questions immediately. If your 10-year-old asks, "Mom, what's a condom?" while you're negotiating a tricky turn in rush-hour traffic, it's okay for you to say something like, "That's an important question. But with all this traffic, I can't explain right now. Let's talk later, after dinner." And make sure you do.

5. Communicate Your Values.

As a parent, you have the chance to be the first person to talk with your child about tough issues before anyone else can confuse him or her with "just-the-facts" explanations that lack the sense of values and moral principles you want to instill. Remember: Research shows that children want and need moral guidance from their moms and dads, so don't hesitate to make your beliefs clear.

6. Listen to Your Child.

How many times do you listen to your children while folding clothes, preparing for the next day's meeting, or pushing a shopping cart through the supermarket? While it's understandable that parents are very busy, it's important to find time to give children your undivided attention. Listening carefully to your children builds self-esteem by letting your youngsters know that they're important to you, and it can lead to valuable discussions about a wide variety of sensitive issues.

7. Try to Be Honest. Whatever your children's ages, they deserve honest answers and explanations. It's what strengthens your children's ability to trust. Also, when parents don't provide a straightforward answer, kids make up their own fantasy explanations, which can be more frightening than any real, honest response you might offer. While you may not want or need to share all the details of a particular situation or issue with your child, try not to leave any big gaps.

8. Be Patient. Often it can feel like forever before a youngster gets his story out. As an adult, you may be tempted to finish the child's sentence for him or her, filling in words and phrases in an effort to hear the point sooner. Try to resist this impulse. By listening patiently, your children can think at their own pace, and you are letting them know that they are worthy of your time.

9. Use Everyday Opportunities to Talk. It's important to try to talk with your kids about tough issues often, but there isn't always time in the day to sit down for a long talk. Also, children tend to resist formal discussions about today's toughest issues, often categorizing them as just another lecture from mom and dad. But if you use "talk opportunities," moments that arise in everyday life, as occasions for discussion, your children will be a lot less likely to tune you out. A public service TV commercial, for example, can give you an opportunity to talk about teen pregnancy or HIV/AIDS.

10. Talk About it Again. And Again. Since most young children can only take in small bits of information at any one time, they won't learn all they need to know about a particular topic from a single discussion. That's why it's important to let a little time pass, then ask your child to tell you what he or she remembers about your conversation. This will help you correct any misconceptions and fill in missing facts. Finally, in an effort to absorb all they want to know, children often ask questions again and again over time — such repetition is perfectly normal, so be prepared and tolerant.

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BREAKING THE ICE:
Get the Conversation Going!

Here are some possible questions and conversation starters that you can use when you want to talk to your children about sex.

Have you noticed any changes in your body?

Do your friends ever talk about kissing or about their boyfriends and girlfriends?

(When watching TV together)
Those two seem to fall in love quickly. What do you think is going on?

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Sex Education and Age-Appropriate Topics

Children will begin hearing words about sex and using sexual language as early as kindergarten. As they grow older, they will begin learning about sex from their peers and pick up random and sometimes inaccurate information about sex that they will not fully understand. One of the challenges you will face in determining what to say to your children is learning what is most appropriate for their age group. Here are some pointers from child development experts about talking with your children about sex at the right time in their lives.

TIPS FOR WHEN TO TEACH YOUR CHILDREN

Below are some recommendations from the *Talking With Kids* campaign and child development experts about age-appropriate topics.

Elementary School
- The correct names of sexual organs and body parts
- Explaining sex and reproduction
- Pregnancy
- Building healthy relationships
- Setting personal boundaries and respecting others' boundaries

Middle School
- Sexual decision-making
- Emotions and consequences of sexual relationships
- Sexually transmitted diseases

High School
- Dating and relationships
- Sexual decision-making
- Emotions and consequences of sexual relationships
- Sexually transmitted diseases
- Contraception

KEEP INFORMED

Find Out About Your Child's Sex Education Classes

You probably know what your child is learning in math or English class, but do you know what your child is being taught in school about sex? Have you ever seen a copy of the curriculum or study guide for sex education classes? Have you ever encouraged your child to share what they are learning in biology or health classes?

Many parents say they don't really know what is taught in the classroom about sex and would like to know more about what their child is learning. Others say they don't really know what their state or local requirements are for teaching sex education. Don't be afraid to ask. Here are some ways you can become more involved in what your child is learning.

- **Take a look at your child's health class textbook**, which should give you a good idea about sex education topics being taught in the classroom. A large percent of schools teach sex education during health classes.
- **Call your school or visit** to find out more about what your child is being taught and at what age certain subject matter is taught. Ask to see the curriculum and study guides.
- **Don't be afraid to speak up** if you have ideas on what you believe should be taught in the classroom. Let the principal know what you think.
- **Know that your local and National PTA is a resource** and can help you find information and/or guide you to other resources that can assist you in learning more.
- **Use the resources in this guide** to learn more about your state and local programs and policies regarding sex education and to find out the latest data on sexual health trends affecting your state or community.

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Resources

INFORMATION FOR PARENTS

To order additional copies of *Talking With Kids: A Parent's Guide to Sex Education* (also available in Spanish as of June 2002).
Visit www.pta.org/parentinvolvement/healthsafety/.

National PTA Parent Involvement provides information and advice to parents in talking with children about HIV/AIDS and other tough issues.
Visit www.pta.org/parentinvolvement/healthsafety/index.asp

The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation provides facts and analysis for policymakers, the media, the health care community, and the general public. **Kaisernetwork.org** provides daily reports on HIV/AIDS, reproductive and sexual health, and health policy news and issues.
Visit www.kff.org and www.kaisernetwork.org

***Talking With Kids About Tough Issues* Campaign**
Talking With Kids About Tough Issues is a national initiative by Children Now and the Kaiser Family Foundation to encourage parents to talk with their children earlier and more often about tough issues like sex, violence, drugs, and respect. English and Spanish versions are available.
Visit www.talkingwithkids.org or call (800) CHILD-44.

Through a partnership with Nickelodeon, *Talking With Kids* has created additional resources for parents.
Visit www.everythingNick.com

National Parent Information Network
NPIN is a clearinghouse of articles and abstracts designed to help answer parents' questions.
Visit ericps.crc.uiuc.edu/npin/index.html
or call the ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education at Teachers College at (800) 601-4868, or the National Library of Education at (800) 424-1616.

INFORMATION FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

Below we have listed some resources for parents who would like additional information and other resources geared toward teens. All the Web sites are hosted by reputable organizations. However, we recommend that parents preview the teen sites before passing along the information to their children.

Nickelodeon
Through a partnership with *Talking With Kids*, Nick.com has created resources for kids to encourage family communication on a variety of issues, including sex and puberty.
Visit www.Nick.com/your_world

Sex Has Consequences
This site for teens by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy includes surveys, quizzes, and stories from real teens about abstinence and sexual health issues.
Visit www.teenpregnancy.org/teen or call (202) 478-8500.

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Resources

I Wanna Know
This resource for teens from the American Social Health Association provides factual information and answers to teens' common questions about sexual health.
Visit www.iwannaknow.org or call (919) 361-8400.

It's Your (Sex) Life
It's Your (Sex) Life is a guide to safe and responsible sex with information for young people on pregnancy and contraception, HIV/STDs, and communicating about sex.
Visit www.itsyoursexlife.com or call (888) BE SAFE-1.

RESOURCES ON SPECIFIC TOPICS

Abstinence

The Office of Adolescent Pregnancy Programs of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services lists descriptions of state-level abstinence education programs funded through the Adolescent Family Life program.
Call (301) 594-4000.

HIV/AIDS

Cornell University's Talking with Kids About HIV/AIDS Project
This site includes resources and activities for parents and is available in English and Spanish.
Visit www.human.cornell.edu/pam/extensn/hivaids/index.cfm or call (607) 255-1942.

Teen pregnancy

National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy provides a 50-state map with recent data on teen pregnancy and childbearing, as well as contacts for more information.
Visit www.teenpregnancy.org and click on Facts and Stats or call (202) 478-8500.

Resource Center for Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention provides practical tools and information to effectively reduce sexual risk-taking behaviors. Visit www.etr.org/recapp/ or call (830) 438-4060.

General health issues

KidsHealth provides comprehensive medical information on children's health issues and includes parenting tips on talking with kids about sex. Visit www.kidshealth.org/parent/.

BOOKS

Beyond the Big Talk: Every Parent's Guide to Raising Sexually Healthy Teens—From Middle School to High School and Beyond, by Debra W. Haffner (Newmarket Press, 2001)

Sex and Sensibility: The Thinking Parent's Guide to Talking Sense About Sex, by Deborah Roffman (Perseus Books, 2000)

Ten Talks Parents Must Have with Their Children About Sex and Character, by Pepper Schwartz, Ph.D., and Dominic Cappello (Hyperion, 2000)

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